

‘Thought, Freedom, and Embodiment in Kant and Sellars’ (2017)James R. O’Shea, *University College Dublin*

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ABSTRACT: Sellars once remarked on the “astonishing extent to which in ethics as well as in epistemology and metaphysics the fundamental themes of Kant’s philosophy contain the truth of the variations we now hear on every side” (SM x). Also astonishing was Sellars’ 1970 Presidential Address to the *American Philosophical Association* (APA), which borrowed its title from the phrase in Kant’s Paralogisms, “...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...” (B404). In its compact twenty-five pages Sellars managed to sketch novel yet plausible reconstructions of central aspects of Kant’s views on self-knowledge, persons, freedom, and morality, along the way suggesting how all of those Kantian views could plausibly be rendered consistent with a naturalistic ontology. In this chapter I focus on Sellars’ APA address as an occasion for reflection on how both Kant and Sellars offer insights into how we ought best to conceive the nature of and the relationships between our thinking selves, our practical agency, and our entirely natural, material embodiment.

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In the Preface to *Science and Metaphysics* Sellars remarked on the “astonishing extent to which in ethics as well as in epistemology and metaphysics the fundamental themes of Kant’s philosophy contain the truth of the variations we now hear on every side” (SM x).¹ Also astonishing, in many ways, was Sellars’ own 1970 Presidential Address to the *American Philosophical Association* (APA), which borrowed its title from the phrase in Kant’s Paralogisms, “...this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks...” (A346/B404).² In its compact twenty-five pages Sellars managed to sketch novel yet plausible reconstructions of central aspects of Kant’s views on self-knowledge, persons, freedom, and morality, along the way suggesting how all of those Kantian views could plausibly be rendered consistent with a naturalistic ontology. In this chapter I want to focus on Sellars’ APA address as an occasion for reflection on how both Kant and Sellars – or so I will contend – offer insights into how we ought best to conceive the nature of and the relationships between our thinking selves, our practical agency, and our entirely natural, material embodiment.

I

On Sellars’ view, and I think for Kant too, what most fundamentally unites the theoretical domain of our cognition of objects with the practical domain of freedom and morality is our

¹ References to Sellars’ works are according to the standard abbreviations for his works listed in the References, followed by one or more of the following (depending on the work): chapter or part, sections or paragraphs (§), added paragraph numbering in recent Ridgeview editions (§¶), or page numbers. I follow a standard practice among philosophers of using ‘single’ quotation marks for mentioning items and for ‘scare quote’ qualifications, reserving “double” quotation marks for direct quotations.

² References to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard ‘A/B’ (first edition/second edition) marginal page numbers, all translations here taken from the Guyer and Wood Cambridge edition.

capacity for *thought*; or more particularly, for thought as governed by various norms of reasoning. Both sense perception and volition, for example, are fundamentally species of conceptual *thinking*, for Sellars. As he put it in his 1967 Lindley Lecture on ethical theory:

(§1) The focal point of practical reasoning is action, as the focal point of empirical reasoning is observation. Perceptual takings or 'judgments' are the thoughts which typically arise from the impact of the world on our mind through our sensory capacities. Volitions are the thoughts which typically impinge on the world through our motor capacities.

(§2) Intentions can be thought of, somewhat metaphorically, as practical commitments. Volitions can correspondingly be thought of as practical commitments to do something *here and now*, and hence as a special case of commitments to do something at sometime or other. (FCET §§1–2)

Sellars' primary *model* for thought – that is, for how to understand what thought *is* – is in terms of our public verbal behaviour as reflected in various norm-governed causal patterns of inference, and in various norm-governed causal patterns of perceptual response and intentional action in relation to one's environment. Sellars furthermore famously argued in 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind' (EPM, 1956), in his 'myth of genius Jones' (cf. EPM X–XV), that the further naturalistic posit of a kind of representationalist "Mentalese" or language of thought in the mind/brain was not only permissible but required on overall explanatory grounds. But for present purposes we can stick to the public, pragmatic, and Wittgensteinian features of Sellars' conceptions of meaning and of thought in terms of norm-governed usage and of functional roles respectively, which for most philosophical purposes also fits the spirit of Kant's view of concepts as involving in the prescription of rules (cf. O'Shea 2016a).

In his APA address on Kant, accordingly, Sellars focuses on the character of our *thinking* across both the theoretical and practical domains. The lead question of the article is the same as Kant's in the Paralogisms: namely, what is the nature of our thinking being, or as Sellars puts it, of 'an I', or of 'this I', "meaning roughly whatever can be referred to by an appropriate tokening of 'I'" (I §3)? He then proceeds to defend both Kant's epistemic account of the *a priori* unity of an I, as a necessary condition of the possibility of experience, and Kant's diagnosis of the fallacies involved in traditional metaphysical accounts of the nature of such a thinking being, as the subject matter of a putative 'Rational Psychology' (I §5). Here I want to focus on the ways in which the Kant-Sellars view of the 'I think' relates to the wider systematic issues pertaining to nature, freedom, and morality that Sellars discusses in the rest of the APA article.³ Along the way I will argue for modifications to the views of both Kant and Sellars such that in the end a distinctively *Kantian naturalist* outlook on these issues is supposed to emerge as plausible, at least in broad strokes.

The most abstract but also the most fundamental unity of the thinking self, for Kant and Sellars, is what might be called a *thought-unity*: a conceptually represented unity, but one that consists in the unity of a form of representation rather than the representation of the self as a unified *thing* or object or substance, whether material or immaterial. Kant's arguments for this are familiar but controversial. They start out, for example, with the distinction between manifolds or successions of thoughts or experiences taking place *in* a consciousness, in contrast to the thought or experience

³ For a sustained analysis and defense of central aspects of the views of both Kant and Sellars on the nature of the thinking self, see Jay F. Rosenberg's unjustly neglected book, *The Thinking Self* (Rosenberg 2008), recently re-issued by Ridgeview Publishing Company (www.ridgeviewpublishing.com). For a basic presentation of Kant's conception of the self as it figures in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, see O'Shea 2014, especially chapter 4.

of such manifolds or successions *as* a manifold or a succession, in a judgment or conceptual rule. The latter sorts of object-constituting thought-unities or conceptual rules are argued to be necessary for the possibility of any potentially self-aware experience – for example, for the possibility of any awareness or representation of oneself *as having* experiences of a world of objects or phenomena that exist independently of those experiences. On this Kant-Sellars view, a thinking self is, at least with respect to this first most abstract necessary condition, itself an achievement of representation or thought. The key point is this: on this view, it *just is* in thinking in accordance with the rule-governed conceptual distinctions and experience-informed inferential patterns that implicitly distinguish a generally lawful world of objects from one's perspectival experiences of them, that we thereby implicitly represent *ourselves* as experiencers of that world in the first place. On Kant's view, to uncover this feature of our consciousness through transcendental abstraction or reflection is not to reify the self in any further sense than as just stated. This is why, for example, if one goes *searching* for the self phenomenologically or experientially, one finds it to be systematically elusive (cf. O'Shea 2015).

What Sellars rightly goes on to emphasize in this account, however, is what it does *not* entail, both what it rules out, and what it leaves open. By contrast, what I will call the general *disembodiment* style of objections to Kant's views on these and other matters, both in his theoretical and his practical philosophy, is the familiar form of criticism that in thus conceiving the self (or as we shall also see, freedom and morality) in such attenuated, abstract, or formal terms – and worse, of course, as also characterized by apparent assertions of ultimately “supersensible” or non-spatio-temporal existence – Kant renders impossible any ultimately satisfactory account of our naturally embodied cognition and practical agency in the empirical world. However, I think that in cases where there is something right about the disembodiment style of objections to Kant's view, at least as far as Kant himself is concerned, more often than not the objections locate the problems in the wrong place. And unlike those more familiar objections, in the APA paper Sellars sketched original interpretations of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy that, while departing from Kant in certain key respects, provide what I contend is an unusually penetrating interpretation of Kant's own views.

The present case of the nature of the thinking self is a particularly difficult one to sort out in this respect. Sellars begins by analyzing Kant's view of the I in the Paralogisms as supporting three main points:

- (1) the I is a being of unknown species which thinks;
- (2) the I doesn't simply 'have thoughts': *it thinks* – but in knowing *that* it thinks, and *what* it thinks, we are not knowing what sort of being it is.

Yet,

- (3) the I must have a nature – what it is we cannot know, though we *can* know that it is not material substance. (I §22)

Sellars explains Kant's claims roughly as follows. What we know *a priori* is the I as a form of thought-unity, as I have put it. We cannot, by contrast, know *a priori* the nature of the I as a thing or object, i.e., as the 'ultimate subject' of our thoughts in *that* sense. Kant's further claim, that we *can*, however, know that the nature of the I is *not* material, pertains to matter conceived as the movable in space, as *res extensa* (or more accurately, as fields of force) in space and time.

The ground of claim (3) is not, Sellars says, because on Kant's view we have any “positive, let alone adequate, idea of mind as a *sort of being*” (I §18). Rather, it is in part because of the arguments mentioned above from the Deduction. The materialists and reductive empiricists are in danger of missing the crucial transcendental point that the *irreducible representational role* of the 'the simple I' of apperception cannot be accounted for in terms of concepts pertaining to the spatial

pluralities with which matter presents us. And that is correct, I think, insofar as we are talking, at least at this level of functional abstraction, only about the necessary unity of a certain form of representation or thought-unity. Furthermore, Sellars suggests, (3) finds additional support for Kant from his view that our empirical knowledge of the self finds no space, so to speak, in the primary qualities of matter for our mental states as we are aware of them in introspection or ‘inner sense’.⁴ In the background here is Kant’s general Galilean view that the secondary sensible qualities, of color as experienced, for example, must have their empirical home somehow in the experiencer in contrast to the fields of force and materials that constitute *space*, for Kant. Kant himself is in the end, in this domain, a kind of agnostic inner/outer *empirical dualist*: as Sellars puts it, instead “of opting for a Strawsonian account of the empirical self,” that is, a neo-Aristotelian account of selves as embodied persons with both mental capacities and physical characteristics, “Kant opts for a dualistic model” (I §41; cf. §18).

Again, he does not do so because we have any positive idea of what a mind is *per se*; rather, we know only the represented unity in our thinking that is achieved by our own thoughts, as noted above. If we move from consideration of the sensory aspects of consciousness to our conceptual thinkings *per se*, these for Kant are primarily functional-representational activities or rules of unity (cf. I §§20–1), consisting for example in the representation of law-governed modal constraints in experience. For the Critical as opposed to pre-Critical Kant, our thinkings do not, contrary to Descartes and other Rational Psychologists, present themselves to us as having or entailing a *nature per se* (as attributes of an immaterial “mental substance”; cf. I §§18–19).

We might add that grounds for Kant’s denial of materialism in claim (3) can be found in his reasoned opposition throughout the Transcendental Dialectic to any global ontological claims about the nature of the cosmos as a complete whole *per se*. For Kant the latter indirect support for his transcendental idealism entails that all *denials* of immaterialism and of theism (as represented in the ideas of soul and God respectively) are as dogmatic as their speculative assertion, though the ideas themselves are warranted for us merely as regulative ‘as if’ ideas that guide our practical hopes and our unending theoretical enquiries (cf. O’Shea 2014, Chs. 2 and 6). With reason’s regulative idea of the soul, according to Kant, we can and should combat any globally assertive materialistic naturalism by thinking of our own thinking nature *as if* it were a non-spatial unified being or substance. But for Kant no such conclusion can in fact be non-fallaciously inferred from anything we actually know about our thinking selves.

So our knowledge of the I, for Kant, is limited in principle to the various *a priori* and empirical resources described above. The texts of Kant’s Paralogisms do broadly support Sellars’ main interpretive moves in this domain, or so I would claim.

Sellars begins to bring out the primary *revision* that he thinks needs to be made to Kant’s view in this case – and this, I think, is one element of truth in the familiar disembodiment objections – by pointing out certain ontological possibilities that Kant in the Paralogisms recognized as at least logically thinkable. Sellars quotes from the following passage:

The identity of the consciousness of Myself in different times is therefore only a formal condition of my thoughts and their connection, but it does not prove at all the numerical identity of my subject, in which – despite the logical identity of the I – a change can go on that does not allow it to keep its identity; and this even though all the while the identical-

⁴ Sellars suggests that this pertains particularly to our sense-perceptual mental states: cf. I §§17, 20–1, 40. For the most part I will not be concerned with his various comments about “reductive materialism” insofar as they are (as the alert reader of Sellars will know) concerned with problems pertaining to qualitative sensory consciousness and Sellars’ distinctive engagement with that issue.

sounding “I” is assigned to it, which in every other state, even in the replacement of the subject, still keeps in view the thought of the previous subject, and thus could also pass it along to the following one. (A363)

And he comments on this as follows:

[Kant] is suggesting that the “logical identity” of the I through Time, which is an analytic implication of the knowledge of oneself as thinking different thoughts at different times, is compatible with the idea that these thoughts are successive states of different ultimate subjects. Compare the materialist who argues that the thoughts which make up the history of an I are states of systems of material particles which are constantly losing old and gaining new constituents. (I §27)

I will comment on Sellars’ final remark about materialism further below. For the present, the point is that it is at least barely thinkable that *the mind* – that is, the thinking self as thought-unity – might not turn out to be, in itself, an *ultimate logical subject* at all, but rather a series or plurality of ultimate subjects. In a different passage (A359), Kant also suggests the thinkable possibility that the thought-unity of the thinking self might turn out to be, ‘in itself’ (i.e., as ‘noumenon’), a unified substantial *person* as ground of both one’s mental capacities and one’s spatial-material attributes. Kant’s Paralogisms thus contain thought experiments according to which such an ultimate logical subject could at least thinkably be, in itself, either a substantial unity or an ultimate plurality of substances (with memories passed from one ‘substance’ to another, for example).⁵

But Sellars’ main point here is this: Kant held that the thinking self or the I is *knowable* primarily only as a set of *capacities* of various kinds, and for Kant we must remain agnostic about the ultimate grounding or realization of these capacities. What Sellars himself is proposing at this point is easily misunderstood, however, especially given his comparison with “the materialist” quoted above. Sellars’ argument is that Kant’s own view of the thinking self, in the specific respects just noted, has shown why *we* can make a different move from Kant at this point; i.e., why it is intelligible *for us* to reject the agnosticism inherent in Kant’s own *empirical dualism* of the inner mental vs. the outer material, while nonetheless maintaining Kant’s conception of the thought-unity of the thinking self. We can then intelligibly defend a view, which Sellars is clear that Kant himself did not hold, of our knowable *empirical* selves as fully materially embodied *persons* exercising various normatively characterized mental abilities and possessing various physical attributes. For what Kant has argued to be at least thinkable is that a logical subject which is necessarily not *represented as* an aspect of something more basic could nonetheless, in itself, turn out to be identical with something that has both thinking capacities and material attributes. And so we, if not Kant, can argue that in fact our irreducibly normative thinking capacities are fully realized in, and so (as Sellars puts this suggested revision of Kant) can in fact be “*identical with*[.] the being which, as having material attributes, is the body” (I §30).

I think both the interpretive and the reconstructive aspects of these contentions of Sellars’ are basically on target here too, although Sellars’ often unclear dialectical qualifications in the APA paper seem to have led some Kant interpreters to think that Sellars was basically or indirectly attributing our *materialist* functionalism *to Kant*, which as we have seen is not what Sellars was

⁵ For important historical and conceptual discussions of these issues, including highly knowledgeable examinations and sympathetic criticisms of Sellars’ readings of Kant, within the context of a more classically metaphysical outlook on Kant’s views on the soul in the first *Critique* than I am presenting here, see Ameriks 2000, e.g. pp. 62–3.

doing.⁶ The particular speculative suggestion is not that *Kant himself* was either a functionalist or a non-reductive materialist, but that *we* might adopt and put Kant's own critical-transcendental account of the thinking self to use within what we might call a *Kantian naturalist* conception of our irreducibly normative yet fully materially embodied thinking nature.

From this perspective we can agree with Kant's famous argument in the Refutation of Idealism, while rejecting Kant's own inner/outer empirical dualism. That is, we can agree that the cognition of the temporal ordering of one's own mental states depends upon a prior background involving the direct cognition of persisting material objects in space in general. But what Sellars notes now, however, is that given Kant's view of the nature of the world of appearances in space and time, presumably the mental states of our reconstructed, fully embodied (Strawsonian-Aristotelian) persons, just as much as is the case in relation to Kant's own empirical dualism of the objects of inner and outer sense, "would be 'appearances' belonging to a deterministic natural order" (I §40). For as Sellars notes, all of the "states of the empirical self," for Kant, both inner and outer, "belong to a deterministic system of events the core of which consists of material events occurring to interacting material substances" (I §44). The problem of determinism thus provides Sellars with a quiet segue into the second half of the APA paper, on topics concerning freedom and morality.

What eventually becomes clear by the end of the paper is that Sellars takes Kant's reference not just to "this I or he" but in particular to "*it, the thing*" which thinks, to be a hint that all of the preceding views about the irreducible yet (we might hold) fully materially embodied thinking self has not yet by itself given us the human *person*, properly speaking (cf. I §62–3). Rather, by themselves the sorts of theoretical considerations (in Kant's sense) considered so far might conceivably only give us what Sellars calls "an *automaton spirituale* or *cogitans*, a thinking mechanism" (I §63).⁷ As he puts it:

What is haunting Kant, in this cryptic passage [i.e., "this I, or he or it, (the thing) which thinks"], is the concept of an *automaton spirituale*, a mind which conceptualizes, but only in response to challenges from without, and in ways which, however varied, realize set dispositions. (I §65)

With regard to "it, (the thing) which thinks" Sellars refers us to Kant's statement in his later *Metaphysics of Morals* that a "*thing* is that to which nothing can be imputed" (MM 6:223).⁸ And if we

⁶ Even Ameriks (see 2000: 81n84) would in this respect appear to attribute to Sellars more than the latter is actually asserting of Kant when he (Sellars) writes that "Kant's analysis of the Paralogisms *opens the way for him to hold* . . . that the empirical I . . . is identical with (i.e., *is*) a composite physical object" (Sellars I §30, first italics added); or again when Sellars writes that Kant "*has kept the way clear for the view* that thoughts and other representations are in reality complex states of a system, and in particular, of a neurophysiological system" (Sellars MP 240, in KTM ¶59, italics added). Here "Sellars surely goes too far," according to Ameriks (*ibid.*). However, in neither case, I think, does Sellars mean to suggest that *Kant* meant to "open the way" or "keep it clear" for such materialist views to be held by anyone – we've seen Sellars state that Kant denies that such materialist positions can coherently be held. Rather, Sellars is suggesting that Kant's views in this specific, highly abstract respect can be adopted and adapted *by us* in defense of such a view.

⁷ For a recent discussion of Sellars' views on Kant on spontaneity, with further helpful references to other recent literature on that topic (for example, Pippin 1987), see Marco Sgarbi 2012: 6–9. For an excellent analysis of the overall importance to Sellars of both Kant's and post-Kantian (and in particular Hegel's) views about the nature of human reflexivity and self-determining freedom, see Terry Pinkard 2006.

⁸ References to 'MM' are to Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), using the Cambridge Edition version and the standard *Akademie* edition volume: page references.

follow up that reference further, we find that Kant precedes that statement about thinghood with this one:

A *person* is a subject whose actions can be *imputed* to him. *Moral* personality is therefore nothing other than the freedom of a rational being under moral laws (whereas psychological personality is merely the ability to be conscious of one's identity in different conditions of one's existence). (Kant MM 6:223)

In roughly the second half of the APA paper, then, what we find Sellars wrestling with is the question of how practical reason and intentional action, and hence freedom and morality, are related to our embodied personality as thinkers, or as 'thought unities', discussed above.

Here in the practical domain, as we saw earlier in the theoretical domain, there will be further opportunities for understandably misinterpreting Sellars' carefully qualified reading of Kant. We have seen above that Sellars was not attributing to Kant an implausibly prescient materialist-functionalist philosophy of mind, but rather an empirical dualism – one which was, however, grounded in revolutionary formal insights about concepts as functions and about the unity of thought, which Sellars argues *we* can put to Strawsonian and functionalist uses. Similarly here, Sellars is not suggesting, for example, that Kant himself *did* conceive the unity of thought in the theoretical domain in accordance with an *automaton* conception of theoretical thinking, one that is characterized by what Sellars calls a merely "*relative spontaneity*," and which would then be sharply contrasted with the genuine spontaneity or autonomy of transcendental freedom. There is truth in the contrast between the two, but not when reified in that way. In my view, Sellars sees that one important key to Kant's philosophy in both domains is that, for Kant, abstraction in these respects does not entail reification. That is, Kant's method involves abstracting from our embodied experiences and actions various formal principles of thought and freedom that are thereby revealed as having necessarily been operative within those embodied realities themselves, without this reflective distinction by itself entailing any real disembodiment or non-spatio-temporal thinghood *per se*, whether known or unknown. What Sellars saw more clearly than most Kant commentators, I believe, is that not only embodiment but also a primacy accorded to *practice* and *purpose* is implicit throughout the rarefied non-empirical atmosphere of each of Kant's three highly abstract *Critiques*, including the Transcendental Analytic of the first *Critique*.

On the theme of determinism, Sellars begins by commenting as follows on Kant's view of the *self-affection* that is involved in the mind's own introspective searching of its own contents (analogous to our being affected by outer objects):

§66. [Kant] grants that 'inner perception' may be prepared for by an activity of searching, a direction of attention in which the mind affects itself, just as perceptual response may occur in a context in which we are looking for something, seeking relevant observations. But why the direction of attention? Relevance to what? Here considerations of purpose enter in and the first *Critique* simply *abstracts* from the purposive aspects of the conceptualization involved in experiential knowledge.

§67. Now it is clear that although the structure of the first *Critique* highlights what I have called the relative spontaneity of the conceptualizing mind, it clearly presupposes a larger context in which the mind is thinking to some purpose. Thus reference to reason in its practical aspect is implicit throughout the *Critique*, but only in the Dialectic, after the constructive argument is over, does it become explicit. (I §§66–7)

I think the outlook sketched in these passages is crucial for correctly interpreting Kant's critical philosophy across the board, and in particular for questions concerning how to understand Kant's

applications of his transcendental principles in his writings beyond the three *Critiques*.⁹ Those applications involve increasingly empirically contentful and correspondingly *a priori* indeterminate and merely regulative domains – applications that often, not surprisingly, have thus seemed to many interpreters to involve inconsistent shifts in Kant’s doctrines across these different contexts. But Kant’s regulative maxims of reason and reflective judgment, for instance, are not *solely* heuristic ‘as if’ principles of organization and search. More fundamentally, Kant takes these more empirical and (as he puts it) “indeterminate” regulative principles and generic material applications to be necessary for the very possibility of the sorts of determinative categorial experience that he had already analyzed, with respect to its most abstract structures, in the Transcendental Analytic of the first *Critique*. Kant says this explicitly in various places, but it is understandably difficult to keep what is all along supposed to be kept implicitly in mind as one moves along from Kant’s Analogies of Experience, through his regulative maxims of reason, to the regulative principles of purposiveness in the Third *Critique* and beyond to all their various intended applications in nature and in action.

II

So: what *does* happen in the second half of Sellars’s APA paper, by way of making explicit the wider practical context that was left implicit in the above doctrines concerning our embodied conceptual thinking? We left off at the point where Sellars had noted that the “states of the empirical self” for Kant, both inner and outer, “belong to a deterministic system of events” (I §44). Here Sellars begins by introducing a further modification of Kant’s views concerning the empirical self. He suggests that Kant, like many other philosophers, implicitly assumes that if nature is indeed a deterministic system, it must follow from this that we ourselves are *passively caused to be in* whatever mental or physical states we are in. “The picture,” Sellars writes, “is that all natural objects are passive with respect to their states – so that if they cause other things to change, they do so because they have, in their turn, been caused by other things to be in the state by virtue of which they are causes” (I §48).

By contrast, Sellars contends (and argues elsewhere) that “*The past is not something with respect to which we are passive*” (I §49), and that this is so even on the assumption that we along with everything else are thoroughly ensconced within nature considered as a deterministic, physical system. This idea reflects Sellars’ own unique version, at least in this respect, of the familiar compatibilist contention that only in certain kinds of circumstances are we (as we would ordinarily say) *forced* or compelled by “foreign causes,” as Kant puts it (cf. I §50), to think or to act or to will as we do. In our thinking, for example – and hence in our intentions, volitions, and actions, too – we are not entirely the playthings of nature but are also actively thinking, self-monitoring systems, as it were. “Pure apperception,” writes Sellars, “gives us a non-passive awareness of the mind as active. Indeed [he continues], Kant insists again and again that the mind is aware of the ‘unity’ and ‘spontaneity’ of its acts of synthesis” (I §56).

But Sellars does argue plausibly that, for Kant, the spontaneity of which we are thus aware, considered so far solely from the theoretical perspective, and in relation to the determined appearances of inner and outer sense, might, for all that, still be the merely responsive “relative

⁹ For a detailed example of how this work out with respect to Kant’s Second Analogy in relation to the regulative maxims of reason (in the Appendix to the *Dialectic*) and reflective judgment (in Kant’s third *Critique*), see O’Shea 1997. One can also find in that article references to Kant commentators who find radical shifts or internal confusions in Kant’s views in this domain as a result, I argue, of failing to appreciate this crucial aspect of Kant’s philosophical methodology.

spontaneity” of a “thinking mechanism” (I §63) – a “*theoretical automaton spirituale*” (I §68), as Sellars puts it. Drawing the familiar computer analogy, he suggests that in this sense the mind’s spontaneously initiated logical ‘searches’ in response to data and given its own “computational dispositions” (I §58) would ultimately still be *a* form of passivity, “though not *sheer* passivity” (I §59). The relative spontaneity of pure apperception, so considered, would in this case remain, as Sellars puts it using Kant’s terms, “another example of a cause the causality of which is [itself] caused” (I §59).

It is only in the final quarter of the APA paper that Sellars comes to the properly practical domain from which the earlier analysis of our self-conscious theoretical cognition has abstracted. This concluding analysis takes place in two Kantian steps: not surprisingly, first in relation to what would basically be a neo-Humean conception of *heteronymous* agency, in Kant’s sense; and then finally in relation to *autonomous* agency, or “acting for the sake of principle” (I §85): “freedom in the deeper sense...[Kant] is seeking to explicate.”

Firstly, then, Sellars explains that the relatively spontaneous “freedom of choice” or *Willkür* of (in this case) a heteronymous agent would essentially involve the agent’s combining various intentions and desires with factual information in a procedure that generates “alternative courses of action, one or other of which, *ratified* by the appetitive faculty, would become the decided course of action” (I §68). Within this picture is a higher-order practical premise of “self-love,” to use the traditional term, reflecting the natural human interest in promoting one’s own happiness. Practical reason, *exclusively* so conceived, would not have a principle that is peculiar or *intrinsic* to itself, as Sellars puts it; rather, our practical reason would serve, in the above way, the naturally implanted end of pursuing one’s own happiness, for example, in relation to one’s other “particular desires and aversions” (I §75).¹⁰

By contrast, secondly, Sellars cuts quickly to the chase scene by bluntly formulating his own version of the practical premise that is intrinsic to practical reason, what Kant calls ‘pure’ practical reason, in the following way (Sellars develops this elsewhere, in particular in SM chapter 7; see Koons, this volume, for further discussion):

[The *practical premise* that is intrinsic to practical reasoning is:] “Let any of us persons do that in each circumstance which promotes our common good” (I §79).

Sellars indicates that he will “not attempt to justify the ascription of exactly this premise to Kant,” though he does remark that Kant’s own fundamental moral law is *generic* in character rather than “purely formal” as interpreters of Kant, he thinks, have mistakenly supposed. It does seem to me that scholarship on Kant’s practical philosophy over the last several decades has indeed increasingly stressed that Kant’s moral law, for all its formal universality, is reflectively abstracted from the ways in which it functions both within the natural pursuit of human happiness and in the cultivation of a virtuous character, and hence in relation to our naturally embodied feelings and inclinations. The case in this respect closely parallels the points I stressed earlier in relation to our materially embodied capacity for ‘pure apperception’ as thinkers, as well as concerning the intended empirical realization of Kant’s transcendental principles as one moves from the first two *Critiques* to the third *Critique* on natural purposiveness and beyond to Kant’s later writings. In the

¹⁰ Remarkably, Valaris 2013 (section 1) refers to and argues against what he characterizes as “the so called ‘relative spontaneity’ view, which is championed by commentators like Wilfrid Sellars . . .” In fact Sellars’ intention is to do precisely the *opposite* of that, both as an interpretation of Kant and in his own voice. (This is not to say, of course, that there is not for Sellars an element of truth in the ‘relative spontaneity’ view at its own, primarily non-Kantian level, as we shall see.) Here again Sellars seems not to have done an adequate job signaling his intentions in the paper to his readers.

Presidential Address, in my view, Sellars' remarkable if unheralded achievement was to have articulated the most fundamental abstract principles of the first two *Critiques* in a way that, against the tide of Kant interpretation at the time, correctly situated Kant's accounts of cognition and freedom in relation to their intended naturally embodied realizations.

This is not the occasion to attempt an explication of Sellars' moral theory in detail, but for present purposes a few words on the core truth that he finds in his reformulation of Kant's moral law will be helpful. The moral point of view consists most fundamentally in our capacity to have practically efficacious thoughts, the content of which, as generically expressed in the above principle or "practical premise," is a shared intention or practical commitment that, crudely put, any of us persons act in ways that promote our common good. This of course immediately generates a host of questions concerning the specification of the relevant 'we' or community of 'persons', and concerning the idea that, as Sellars claims, this practical premise "constitutes a purpose which can be said to be implied by the very concept of a community of persons" (§79). And Sellars also recognizes that the compact generic reference within the Kantian practical premise to what, in each circumstance, "promotes our common good," glosses over empirical realities and uncertain means-end reasonings of enormous complexity. Without ignoring the existence of those and many other difficulties, however, the following core conception of our practical agency emerges in Sellars' closing discussions.

Whatever it is that might thus be taken to be the means to promote our common good, Sellars here simply dubs "condition α ," so that the generic practical premise now becomes: "Let any of us persons do that which satisfies condition α ," from which premise, along with relevant information, practical reasoning would derive the particular volitional conclusion: "Let me now do A " (§80). Importantly, however, that I actually *do* A , Sellars points out, assumes not simply that I understand that implication (i.e., the implication, roughly: 'Let any of us do α , so let me now do A '), but also that I actually *affirm the antecedent* of this implication, i.e. the generic practical premise itself. We can see what Sellars has in mind here when he brings in the typically conflicting practical premise of self-love (or of sympathy, or of some other fundamental first-order interest). For then "in cool hours," as Sellars puts it echoing Joseph Butler, we will confront within ourselves the following two opposed practical thoughts:

- (1) "Let me now do A , *because* let any of us do actions satisfying α , *although* this implies not promoting my happiness by doing B ." [This would be acting autonomously "from the moral point of view", i.e. "choosing to do something for the reason that it is implied by the moral law," that is, "as being what I ought to do" (I §§83–5).]

As opposed to:

- (2) "Let me now do B , *because* let me now promote my happiness, *although* this implies my not doing A , which is subsumable under the principle 'let any of us do actions satisfying α .'" [This is to "choose" (*Willkür*) from "the 'personal' point of view" (I §82), whether from self-love, as here, or from sympathy or from any other feeling or interest.]

The moral point of view is thus a form of *thinking*, for Sellars' Kant: an internally motivating thought or efficacious intention (once "affirmed") that is *generic* in its content, as being a commitment that any of us persons perform certain kinds of action in certain kinds of circumstances. As Sellars puts it: "That practical reason is autonomous means that a choice is possible in which practical reason itself affirms the antecedent," i.e. the generic practical premise, rather than one's choice issuing solely from the relative practical spontaneity that is ultimately, however complex, a so-called ratification by one's inclinations or interests (I §85). It is our capacity

to act autonomously “for the sake of principle,” Sellars concludes, that *distinguishes us from what would otherwise, without that capacity, be the exclusively heteronomous choices of an “it (the thing) which thinks.”*

Note that Sellars has here quietly exploited Kant’s distinction between *Willkür*, or freedom of choice, as distinguished from an autonomous *Wille* as the generic or abstract motivating intention to act from the moral point of view (I §§81, 85). Supposing we lacked an autonomous *Wille*, or an intrinsically practical reason in Sellars’ sense, he points out that we would still exercise the relatively spontaneous but ultimately heteronomous power of appetite-ratified choice as outlined above. But crucially, Sellars’ particular account explains how it is that, even as the autonomous rational beings that we are, we must still always exercise choice or *Willkür* as to the matter of *which antecedent premise-intention is (implicitly or explicitly) affirmed in the circumstances*, i.e. that of morality or (for example) self-love. For Sellars is clear that it is *not* intrinsic to autonomous practical reason, but rather a matter of choice (*Willkür*), that one in point of fact affirms one rather than the other – that is, that the one motivating thought rather than the other motivating thought in point of fact turns out to be efficacious in motivating one’s action. (Though Sellars does not mention it here, this account is presumably also designed to help with the classic interpretive problem of addressing how Kant’s moral philosophy is able to account for our freedom to choose to act *immorally*, that is, to freely choose evil.)

In closing his address Sellars adds these final remarks on the wider picture that involves Kant’s *transcendental idealism* (I briefly come back to this in part III, sections [3] and [4] below):

§86. Kant ends on an agnostic note. We are conscious, in pure apperception, of ourselves as autonomous rational beings, beings which *can* act out of respect for principle. But is not, perhaps, this consciousness an illusion? He claims to know, on philosophical grounds, that as objects of empirical knowledge we are *not* autonomous beings. We cannot, alas, show, on philosophical grounds, that *as noumena* we *are* autonomous. He therefore takes refuge in the claim that, equally, we cannot *know*, on philosophical grounds, that as noumena we are *not* autonomous. (I §86)

I will close with some final reflections on this Kant-Sellars conception of thought and of agency as it has emerged in striking form in Sellars’ APA address.

III

[1] First, note Sellars’ remark, just quoted, that “we are conscious, in pure apperception, of ourselves as autonomous rational beings.” This remark restores the implicit practical context of autonomy from which the theoretical examination of the merely “relative spontaneity” of pure apperception had abstracted for the analytical purposes then at hand. This is not to say that our theoretical judgments and ‘syntheses’, according to either Sellars or Kant, are *acts* in the sense of deliberate, intentional *actions*. But it does suggest that both conceptual thinking and practical thinking for Kant and Sellars involve the capacity to reflect on principles, and also that without the implicit wider practical and purposive context we would not be the self-consciously apperceptive thinkers that we are.

[2] Second, it seems to me that there is a complex, at least ostensible circularity implicit in Sellars’ account of the role of normative principles in our practical agency. The situation, I think, closely parallels the ostensible circularity that Sellars wrestled with throughout his career in the theoretical or epistemic domain: namely, that between our general epistemic principles on the one hand, and the particular non-inferential judgments that such principles are supposed to

warrant on the other. Elsewhere I discuss what I call Sellars' *Kantian naturalist* solution to that epistemic circularity problem (most recently in O'Shea 2016b, section 4), and the parallel issue in the present case can be stated this way. The conception of normative 'ought's that Sellars has exploited in his discussion of agency in the APA paper rests elsewhere on his more general account of 'we intentions' (e.g., cf. SM chapter 7 and Koons, this volume).¹¹ But the latter account of community intentions rests on Sellars' conception of individual intentions as practically efficacious motivating thoughts that have both their sense and their efficacy only within an *already* normative 'space of reasons', i.e. within a framework of implicit '*ought-to-be*' rules governing our linguistic and other behaviors. Put more curtly, then, Sellars explains normative principles or 'ought's ultimately in terms of certain kinds of intentions; but what it is to be an intention, on his view, is *constituted* by its role within an already normative space of reasons and linguistic *ought-to-be*'s. The ostensible circle has '*oughts* explained in terms of intentions' and yet 'intentions explained in terms of a space of *oughts*'.

I think Sellars' way of seeing this ostensible circle as benign or merely apparent will have something like the same structure as the Kantian naturalist account of the warrant for epistemic principles that he gives, for example, in "More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence" (MGEC). Along one dimension, that is, normative principles are 'always already there' in our cultural inheritance in its continuing conceptual and practical development over time. From this perspective it is norms both 'all the way down' and 'all the way back', so to speak. Within this outlook a kind of diachronic reflective equilibrium is continually sought between our particular sets of judgments, inferences, and actions, and the more generic but revisable normative principles that are espoused and reflected in those practices. This dimension also includes for Sellars, both in the APA article and in MGEC, various stronger Kantian-style claims: for example in the practical domain, as we have seen, claims about personhood as entailing a certain autonomous capacity to institute norms and to act on principle as such; and claims about moral commitments as in some way conceptually connected to the idea of a *community* as such.

But in the epistemic domain, at any rate, Sellars indicates that there must also be another, circle-breaking *naturalistic* dimension of explanation as well, and in particular a biological evolutionary explanation of the ultimate origin of our capacity for conceptual-linguistic *thinking* itself. As Sellars wrote in MGEC:

Presumably the question 'How did we get into the [epistemic] framework' has a causal answer, a special application of evolutionary theory to the emergence of beings capable of conceptually representing the world of which they have come to be a part. (MGEC §79)

Nature in itself, for Sellars, in one primary sense, knows no 'ought's. But natural selection over time, according to Sellars, generates patterns of bodily-environmental, instinctual-behavioral, and proto-cognitive adaptation such that what it is to be any such item so functioning cannot be understood apart from its place within such a wider normative network or 'selection space' of biological *ought-to-be*'s. The Kant-Sellars account in the APA paper of both our apperceptive intelligence and our autonomous agency must be understood as all along embedded within a wider framework of our *naturally* adaptive or purposive animal inheritance. In a structurally similar but of course altogether differently grounded way, the highly abstract 'analytic' sections of Kant's first and second *Critiques* arguably cannot be understood except in terms of their always intended embodied embedding within the regulatively systematic conception of *natural purposiveness* that Kant outlines in the Appendix to the Dialectic in the first *Critique* and then subsequently expands upon in the third *Critique*.

¹¹ For a detailed historical analysis of Sellars' evolving views on the nature of normativity in the earlier stages of his career, see Olen (2016).

[3] Third, we must in the end come to terms with the elephant in the room: Kant's transcendental idealism, and Sellars' proposal to replace Kant's *noumena* with the postulation of unobservables that is characteristic of ongoing scientific theorizing. I have been focusing on Sellars' naturalism conceived as integrated fully *within* the above Kant-Sellars story in the APA address about our embodied practical agency in the knowable material world, as supplemented with some amplification of Sellars' conception of our evolved animal purposiveness. I have not discussed Sellars' *own* quasi-Kantian transcendental idealism, with its *scientifically* reconceived noumena put forward as a replacement for Kant's unknowable 'things in themselves', and with the object-ontology of the manifest image, with respect to that 'noumenal' object-ontology, supposed to be revealed to be a framework of *mere* 'appearances' that is *strictly speaking* false (for the details, see O'Shea 2016b, and my comments on Brandom in this volume).¹² Sellars was well aware that Kant himself did not defend the particular 'analogical' and 'relocational' story about our sensory consciousness of colored objects, and so on, that forms the centerpiece of Sellars' own confessedly non-Kantian argument for transcendental idealism in ch. 2 of *Science and Metaphysics*. Kant's own transcendental idealism was concerned primarily with recommending the wholesale *critical replacement* of the traditional object-oriented ends of speculative theoretical metaphysics with the idealized ends of our own practical rationality and moral freedom.

On Kant's view we *must* in the end think of nature analogically in terms of an all-powerful intelligent designer's purposive practical handiwork, thus experiencing nature 'as if' it were designed for us to know it through our contingent empirical researches, and 'as if' it were built for the gradual achievement of our highest good using the crooked timber of our practical agency. Kant himself thus formulated our inevitable analogical thoughts about unconditioned 'things in themselves' in terms of the theoretical and practical regulative *ideas* of God and of our own souls, conceived by analogy with our own practical arts and agencies. The deepest irony of all – and Kant himself is in no small part to blame for this – is that whereas Kant's single most important aim in the critical philosophy was to urge this *entirely practical replacement* for the traditional *object-oriented* rationalist metaphysics (including his own pre-Critical Leibnizian metaphysics), thus calling for a revolutionary turn to the morally practical and to the scientifically natural, it has unfortunately been what Kant's readers have taken to be *his own* indulgence in a thoroughly dubious speculative metaphysics of unknowable objects as 'things in themselves' that has continued to mar his philosophical legacy.

I have argued elsewhere that we ought to reject Sellars' quasi-transcendental idealist (and in my view, non-Kantian) contention that the object-ontology of "the common sense framework"—that is, the "manifest image" conception of perceptible, colored physical objects—"is transcendently ideal, i.e. that there really are no such things as the objects of which it speaks" (SM V, §95; italics added; again, see O'Shea 2016b). What can and should be preserved from Sellars' account of sensory consciousness is not his specific quasi-transcendental-idealist relocational ontology (which was based on Sellars' own unquestioned but disputable qualia intuitions concerning 'ultimate homogeneity'; cf. Rosenthal 2016), but rather the more general strategy behind Sellars' then-revolutionary scientific naturalist philosophy of mind. This was the general open-ended idea that the scientific hypothesis of various representational systems in human cognition could be systematically integrated, in a non-trivial way, *within* the sort of irreducibly normative 'space of reasons' for which Sellars is now rightly famous. In different ways Paul Coates, David Rosenthal, Huw Price, Daniel Dennett, Ruth Millikan, Jay Rosenberg, Paul Churchland, and other Sellars-influenced philosophers have substantively explored ways of

¹² For a good recent examination of Kant's theoretical philosophy from a broadly Sellarsian perspective, and one which, however, similarly seeks to integrate scientific realism *within* Kant's phenomenal world rather than in competition with it, see Landy 2015.

integrating such naturalistic theories of perceptual representation and evolved animal agency within, rather than in philosophical isolation from, various of Sellars' other distinctive views in epistemology, semantics, and metaphysics. Furthermore, it is also surely in the spirit of both Kant and Sellars, not to mention Peirce, to suggest that just which kinds of revision of our empirically manifest *object-ontology* might ultimately be required in the future, however radical, should primarily be a matter of ongoing case-by-case inquiry rather than quasi-transcendental argument. Sometimes such explanatory revisions might fit Sellars' Kuhnian-style ontological replacement model, but in other cases, particularly in biology and other special sciences, functional realization and other non-reductive models of explanatory integration are likely to remain more apt (as perhaps Wilfrid's father, Roy Wood Sellars, would have stressed).

[4] Finally, suppose now that, as just recommended, we thus reject Sellars' quasi-transcendental 'scientific noumenalism' (as it were), according to which the ordinary coloured physical objects of the manifest image strictly speaking do not exist, while accepting in all other respects his otherwise Kantian and integrated scientific naturalism (again, I chart this course in O'Shea 2016b). The remaining question is whether the account of Kant's transcendental *freedom* that Sellars has offered introduces any conceptions of our thought and agency that must be inconsistent with the sort of integrated Sellarsian and Kantian naturalism that I have been attempting to delineate in this chapter. Has Kant's conception of autonomy really added anything that is somehow mysteriously beyond the evolved conceptual capacities for perception, inference, and volition that we are now assuming to be in place within a non-reductive yet fully embodied *Kantian naturalism*?

Just as we followed Sellars in trading Kant's empirical dualism for fully embodied Strawsonian personhood, however, I think that Sellars' conceptual distinction mentioned earlier between causally relevant circumstances as opposed to globally metaphysically determinist pseudo-circumstances, together with the resulting idea that we are not passive with respect to the past, would be worth exploring as taking the sting out of Kant's claim, as we saw Sellars put it earlier, that we supposedly "know, on philosophical grounds, that as objects of empirical knowledge we are *not* autonomous beings" (§86). As naturalists with that conception of *Willkür* or freedom of choice we could then plausibly agree with both of the following seemingly contradictory (but in fact merely 'Dialectically' opposed) claims by Kant in the following passage from the second *Critique*:

One can therefore grant that if it were possible for us to have such deep insight into a human being's cast of mind, . . . that we would know every incentive to action, even the smallest, as well as all the external occasions affecting them, we could calculate a human being's conduct for the future with as much certainty as a lunar or solar eclipse and could nevertheless maintain that the human being's conduct is free. (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak. 5:99)

But as we have seen, Sellars in the APA address has also taken his modified agreement with Kant on freedom a step further, as follows.

As noted above, intentions and volitions for Sellars are practically efficacious thoughts that *ceteris paribus* give rise to the corresponding actions so conceived; and in that sense such intentions are intrinsically or internally motivating.¹³ A genuinely autonomous *Wille* or *pure* practical reason in particular, on Sellars' reading, concerns our capacity to be motivated to action by a thought the

¹³ Compare, in the opposite direction of fit, Sellars' view of perceptions as conceptualized thoughts that suitable subjects are normally caused to have in response to the corresponding kinds of object in appropriate situations.

generic or abstract *content* of which, from the moral point of view, is not specifically about any of our ends or interests in particular. Such a practically efficacious thought or ‘pure idea of reason’ is characterized by Kant as ‘a-temporal’ or ‘supersensible’ in part because its content is *disinterested* or non-empirical in the non-mysterious way just noted; and also because in deliberating and acting from such a motive or conceptualized point of view I must ‘practically presuppose’, as Kant variously puts it, that my own generic thought or idea of reason is the sufficient cause of my action.

Kant thinks that *experience* shows that we do have the capacity to act both in conformity to and in opposition to such a principle or abstractly motivating thought; and he contends that this is sufficient to *assert* our freedom without our being able to *prove* its metaphysical reality theoretically. What the critique of speculative object-metaphysics shows, according to Kant, is that the capacity for such an autonomously motivating thought or idea is not *ruled out* by anything we could ever come to know about nature from a scientific or theoretical perspective – and this is the real root of what Sellars above called Kant’s “agnostic note”: that at least “we cannot *know*, on philosophical grounds, that as noumena we are *not* autonomous” (I §86, quoted above).

There are of course influential ways of reading Kant’s transcendental idealism that fit congenially with our having rejected Sellars’ strongly ‘scientific noumenalism’ understood as the thesis that the objects of the manifest image strictly speaking do not exist. On such readings Kant’s so-called agnosticism concerning noumena becomes functionally equivalent to restraining oneself from certain inevitably tempting but fallacy-ridden ‘dogmatic’ ideas, together with the realization that those particular ideas were really all along intended for practically and theoretically *regulative* uses rather than for metaphysical object-cognition. Or if one just cannot manage to see Kant himself entirely in this sweetly revolutionary practical light, then the alternative would be to leave transcendental idealism behind entirely and follow the pragmatists in pushing the regulative fallibilism of Kant’s Dialectic more strongly than Kant envisioned.¹⁴ Either way, however, a Kantian empirical realism can and should be defended as *real* realism: as a naturally embodied realism within a comprehensive normative-practical turn. And *that* Kantian naturalist vision was the central message that Sellars intended his audience to take away from his remarkable 1970 Presidential Address to the APA.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Peirce himself provides an obvious example here. More recent Sellars-inspired pragmatists include, in different ways of course: Richard Rorty, Huw Price, Michael Williams, Robert Brandom, Robert Kraut, Carl Sachs, Steven Levine, Mark Lance and Rebecca Kukla, among others.

¹⁵ My thanks to Deborah Barnbaum and David Pereplyotchik for all their help from the beginning of the *Sellars in a New Generation* conference at Kent State University in May 2015 to its fruition in this volume. My thanks also to the participants in that conference for their comments, and to Fabio Gironi for further comments.

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